NATION

India's maternal death rate still high, says study

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BUSINESS

Adani delivers 2,000 'Prahar' light machine guns to Army

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SPORTS

Praggs braces for challenge as Candidates is set to begin

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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Website: salarnews.in | www.magzter.com | 29 MARCH 2026 | SUNDAY | BENGALURU | 9 SHAWWAL 1447 H | Vol 5 | Issue No 77 | Pages: 8

India bins report of Musk joining Modi-Trump call

MEA says calls was between 2 leaders; Modi dials Saudi Prince

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

India on Saturday rejected reports that billionaire Elon Musk joined a phone call between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump earlier this week. External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal clarified that Tuesday's call was between the two leaders and focused on the Iran war.

The New York Times, citing US officials, had reported that Musk participated in the call, calling it an "unusual appearance" by a private citizen during a wartime discussion. The report suggested Musk's inclusion might signal a reconciliation with Trump following last year's falling out after Musk left a government task force. The White House described the conversation as "productive.

Narendra Modi, Elon Musk and Donald Trump —*PTI*

WEST ASIA WAR
DAY-29

LPG SHIP ARRIVES IN GUJARAT

Indian-flagged vessel 'Jag Vasant', carrying 47,000 metric tonnes of LPG, arrived at Vadinar port in Gujarat's Jamnagar after crossing the Hormuz. The 230m-long vessel loaded cargo from Mina Al Ahmadi Port, Kuwait, and is currently transferring 17,600 MT to the daughter vessel MT Rose Gas in a ship-to-ship operation expected to take 15 hours. Approximately 20,000 MT will be discharged at Mumbai and 9,000 MT at Mangaluru, officials said.

Meanwhile, Modi spoke to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, on Saturday, emphasising the need to maintain freedom of navigation and secure shipping lines. This was their second conversation since the West Asia conflict began on 28 February.

VANCE, BIBI RIFT?

US Vice President JD Vance has pushed back against Benjamin Netanyahu over Israel's claims on the Iran war, according to Axios. In a tense call, Vance questioned what he viewed as overly optimistic assessments, amid growing unease in US over how the conflict was presented and is unfolding. —*PTI*

>>>More on Pgs 4, 5 , 6 & 7

Five Indians injured in UAE missile debris Incident

Five Indians were injured in the UAE by debris following the interception of a ballistic missile, according to local media. The Abu Dhabi Media Office stated that the injuries ranged from moderate to minor. The authorities urged the public to source information from official channels and avoid rumours. Earlier reports indicated two fires near KEZAD caused by falling debris after the missile interception. On Thursday, one Indian and one Pakistani national were killed when missile debris fell on a street. The Indian Embassy expressed "deepest condolences" and is coordinating with UAE authorities for support and assistance. —*PTI*

1ST AFTER GBA FORMATION

The BSCC body allocated Rs 433 crore for large-scale upgrades of arterial and sub-arterial roads, along with ward road —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

B'luru West, South & North City corps present Budgets

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

Three Bengaluru City Corporations presented their maiden budgets for 2026-27, with a focus on infrastructure and welfare.

The Bengaluru West City Corporation (BWCC), and Bengaluru North City Corporation (BNCC), Bengaluru South City Corporation (BSCC) presented their Budgets with respective outlays of Rs 4,732.73 crore, Rs 4,341.20 crore and Rs 3,825.95.

Bengaluru was divided into five municipal corporations—Central, East, West, North and South—under the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) in September 2025, replacing the unified Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). The East and Central Corporations presented their budgets on Friday.

GREENERY FOR BWCC

The BWCC said that a plan will be formulated to establish 100 Miyawaki Forests, a best method for urban greening, including native plant species, in parks, schools, and roadside vacant spaces required in each area to rapidly create dense natural forests in a small area for urban greening within the jurisdiction of the Corporation.

INFRA PUSH FOR SOUTH

The BSCC body allocated Rs 433 crore for large-scale upgrades of arterial and sub-arterial roads, along with ward roads, including scientific asphalt paving, pedestrian-friendly footpaths, integrated drainage systems and junction improvement, in a major push to fix the roads.

NORTH BALANCES BETWEEN ROAD AND WELLFARE

The BNCC attempted to strike a balance between the welfare and infrastructure development, as the body expects to receive a substantial state government grant of Rs 782.27 crore, given its comparatively lower tax revenue.

For housing, Rs 71.07 crore has been allocated for 2026–27. On the infrastructure front, the BNCC plans to widen four roads at a cost of Rs 25 crore to ease traffic congestion, and focus on footpath improvements. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 2

Ruling DMK to contest 164 of 234 seats in TN polls

CHENNAI, 28 MARCH

Chief Minister MK Stalin on Saturday unveiled the seat-sharing arrangement for the ruling DMK-led alliance and released the party's list of candidates ahead of the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam will contest 164 of 234 constituencies, allocating 70 seats to allies. Addressing the media, Stalin dismissed concerns over delays, saying the time was used for "patient discussions" to ensure a balanced agreement. Congress emerged as the principal ally with 28 seats, followed by Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (10), Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (8), Communist Party of India (5), CPI(M) (5), Marumalarchi DMK (4), and smaller parties sharing the rest. Stalin will seek re-election from Kolathur, while Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin is renominated from Chepauk–Tiruvallikeni, securing key Chennai constituencies. Notable changes include Minister Senthil Balaji shifting to Coimbatore South from Karur, making it a high-profile urban battleground. —*PTI*

>>>MORE ON PAGE 3

12L NAMED IN WB'S 2ND SIR LIST, NO CLARITY ON DELETIONS

KOLKATA, 28 MARCH

The Election Commission (EC) published the second supplementary list under the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal on Friday. While the poll panel did not disclose the total number of deletions or inclusions, reports indicate that nearly 12 lakh names on the list have cleared judicial scrutiny.

A total of 58 lakh names were deleted following the enumeration phase of the SIR exercise, slashing the state's eligible electors from the initial 7.66 crore to 7.08 crore on grounds of death, migration, duplication and untraceability.

The post-SIR rolls published on 28 February further reduced the number of valid voters to just over 7.04 crore, including over 60 lakh names under judicial scrutiny.

The commission had released the first supplementary list of 'Under Adjudication' voters on Monday, but remained tight-lipped on the number of deletions or the precise figure of cases disposed of on that list, drawing criticism from various quarters.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's TMC filed an appeal Friday before CJ Sujoy Paul of Calcutta HC, seeking daily publication on Bengal's 2nd supplementary list, but no clarity on who made the cut. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

B'luru prof calls Muslim student terrorist, booked

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

An FIR was registered on Saturday against an adjunct professor of PES University here for allegedly referring to a Muslim student as a "terrorist" during class, police said.

A purported video of the professor admonishing the student for allegedly disturbing the class has gone viral on social media.

After the incident on 24 March, the student approached the college authorities, and the professor was suspended on Friday.

Police registered a case against the professor under Sections 299 (deliberate act intended to outrage religious feelings) and 352 (insult with intent to provoke breach of peace) of BNS.

"We did not receive a complaint from the student. However, taking cognisance of the video, we registered a case," a senior police officer said.

According to the FIR, the professor repeatedly referred to the student as a "terrorist" during class.

"He said the Iran war happened because of people like you. Trump will take you away. You are idiots; you will go to hell,'" the FIR stated.

The remarks were made in front of about 60 students, creating an "extremely hostile environment," it said.

The CCTV footage, which could have served as evidence, was allegedly deleted, the FIR added.

The FIR also stated that some students who supported the victim were suspended for "talking during class."

Although the professor later wrote an apology letter to the college, he did not apologise to the student. The department head apologised on his behalf and is also accused of indirectly warning the student against pursuing the matter, it said. — *PTI*

NEPAL'S EX-PM OLI ARRESTED FOR 2025 GEN Z PROTEST DEATHS

Nepal's ex-PM KP Sharma Oli leaves for a health checkup after being arrested from his residence in Nepal —*PTI*

KATHMANDU, 28 MARCH

A day after Nepal's newly formed Balendra Shah led government implemented the probe commission report on the Gen Z protest last year, the country's former prime minister KP Sharma Oli was arrested on Saturday.

Newly elected PM Balendra decided to immediately implement the probe commission report on Friday that recommended "legal action" Oli and former home minister Ramesh Lekhak among others for their involvement in suppressing the Gen Z movement of 8 and 9 September last year, in which 76 people, including around two dozen youths, were killed.

Oli, also CPN-UML chair, was arrested at the Gundu area of Bhaktapur district, 12 km east of Kathmandu, early Saturday morning.

"Nobody is above the law," wrote Home Minister Sudhan Gurung in a social media post after the arrest. "This is not a revenge against anybody, just the beginning of justice." However, political parties termed the action as a political vendetta. ***>>>More on Page 6***

NEPAL'S PM SAYS 'EAGER TO WORK' WITH INDIA

Nepal's newly elected Prime Minister Balendra Shah expressed his eagerness to work closely with India, following his swearing-in ceremony. Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted Shah shortly after the event and stated he looked forward to strengthening India-Nepal relations.

In response, Nepal's Prime Minister's office posted on X, "Thank you, PM @narendramodi for your kind words and warm wishes. I am eager to work closely with you to advance the multifaceted relations between our two countries for the common prosperity of our people." Nepal is vital for India's strategic interests, relying heavily on India for transportation and trade.

As a landlocked nation, Nepal accesses the sea through India and imports most of its requirements via Indian routes. Shah is the first democratically elected prime minister since the coalition government led by former PM Oli was ousted in September last year, amid youth-led protests against corruption, nepotism, and social media restrictions that turned violent. —*PTI*

RCB HONOURS STAMPEDE VICTIMS

Order, not chaos, marks IPL's return to Chinnaswamy

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

After months of uncertainty, cricket returned to the M Chinnaswamy Stadium on Saturday with the IPL season-opener between Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Sunrisers Hyderabad, as revamped arrangements ensured a smooth start to proceedings.

The venue's future had been in doubt following the June 4, 2025 stampede that claimed 11 lives during RCB's victory celebrations. However, the newly elected KSCA regime under Venkatesh Prasad worked extensively with state government departments to secure clearance for matches.

Preparations included two mock drills on March 23, though concerns remained about handling real match-day conditions. Those fears were largely unfounded as crowd management, particularly along Cubbon Road and Queens Road, was handled efficiently, with disciplined entry into the stadium.

Young fans walk towards the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru on Saturday to watch the IPL opener between RCB and SRH. A supporter holds up a No 11 jersey toy in tribute to the victims of last year's stampede —*MOAHMMED ASAD*

"We have deployed adequate force to manage the crowd outside the stadium to stop people from gathering near the gates. Opening the gates four hours before the match has made our job easier," a senior police official said. Officers ensured fans did not linger near roads, directing them swiftly towards designated entry points.

Parking arrangements also saw improvement, with designated spaces at locations such as Garuda Mall and Freedom Park, from where fans could walk or take transport to the venue.

=RCB's decision to sell nearly 80 per cent of tickets online significantly reduced congestion at the gates, a departure from previous years when last-minute buyers crowded the stadium approaches. Ticket sales, opened on March 24 at 4 pm, were sold out within five minutes, with around 29,000 tickets made available to the public out of a total capacity of 35,000.

Entry infrastructure was strengthened with additional turnstiles and wider gates, expanded to nine metres, facilitating smoother access. Street vendors, including jersey sellers and temporary tattoo artists, were limited in number and confined to designated areas.

A noticeable sense of order prevailed around the stadium, marking a sharp contrast to past experiences. Yet, the electric atmosphere remained intact. Fans greeted Virat Kohli with loud cheers as he stepped out for pre-match routines. In a poignant tribute, RCB players wore No. 11 jerseys during warm-ups to honour the victims of last year's tragedy. Players, officials and spectators observed a minute's silence ahead of the match, while stadium screens displayed the message: "Forever in our hearts."

The solemn gestures added emotional weight to the evening, even as the excitement of live cricket returned.

With improved systems in place and fans back in full voice, the Stadium signalled not just the return of cricket, but the restoration of confidence, without losing its enduring charm. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 8

— PTI

Belagavi sanitation worker on duty run over by tipper

BELAGAVI, 28 MARCH

A 50-year-old municipal sanitation worker, Avakka Kolkar, was killed on the spot Saturday morning after being hit by a speeding tipper truck on the Belagavi–Khanapur road. Kolkar was performing routine street-cleaning when the vehicle, reportedly travelling from Belagavi city, struck her. Speaking on the incident, former deputy mayor Vani Joshi said that the driver, who had fled after the accident, has since been arrested by police. Municipal Environment Engineer Hanumant Kaladagi stated that Kolkar's family will be eligible for government benefits. He also added that financial assistance would be extended for the last rites. This marks the second fatality involving a municipal sanitation worker in a road accident, raising concerns over worker safety during early morning duties.

—SALAR NEWS

— FREEPIK

Drugs worth Rs 12 cr seized in Mysuru, 2 held

MYSURU, 28 MARCH

Mysuru police arrested two persons and seized 48 kg of synthetic drugs worth Rs 12 crores at Asphatre Kaval near Dasanapura village of Hunsur taluk in Mysuru. Superintendent of police Mallikarjuna S Baladandi said that a police team carried out a raid at an isolated shed in Asphatre Kaval and arrested the land owner Ibrahim Khan, a resident of Rahamathnagar in Hunsur town and Mohammed Irfan of Mysuru. Police launched the manhunt to nab another four persons from Mumbai involved in the drug racket. The accused rented the isolated shed to manufacture synthetic drugs after procuring the raw materials from different parts of the country. A probe is underway.*—SALAR NEWS*

State opens 450-bed children's hospital

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

Medical Education Minister Sharan Prakash Patil inaugurated a massive, state-of-the-art 450-bed children's hospital at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health on Saturday. Patil said the country's "first-of-its-kind" hospital aims to provide advanced care and treatment for children. The institution currently operates 450 beds, treating approximately 1,78,000 outpatients and 21,000 inpatients annually, while performing around 5,000 surgeries, a statement from Patil's office said. He further said that, on the lines of the Jayadeva Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences, NIMHANS-model institutes and Endocrinology Centres will be established in Mysuru and Kalaburagi. A dedicated children's hospital will also be built in Kalaburagi at a cost of Rs 100 crore, modelled on the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital, he added.*—PTI*

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Corps balance between infra, & welfare

South, West and North Corps present Budget; Ejipura flyover to be opened in Sept

Rs 60 crore has been allocated for road widening at Subramanyapura Road and Begur Main Road —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

The Bengaluru West City Corporation (BWCC), Bengaluru North City Corporation (BNCC) and Bengaluru South City Corporation (BSCC) attempted to strike a balance between infrastructure, healthcare and welfare as they presented their maiden Budgets on Saturday.

TAX IN FOCUS

"The total revenue for the year 2026-27 is estimated at Rs 4,732.81 crore," the BWCC Budget statement said.

The Revenue Department has set a target of collecting Rs 1,964.60 crore of revenue in 2026-27. Revenue of Rs 872 crore is expected in the form of property tax in 2026-27.

Rs 2 crore revenue is expected from advertisement at 50 proposed skywalks.

The government's new Premium FAR (Floor Area Ratio) Policy is estimated to generate Rs 380 crore.

Similarly, the BSCC aims to generate revenue without increasing property taxes, which is extended to Rs 1,101.30 crore, while Rs 382 crore is projected from building plan approvals and occupancy certificates. FAR is expected to generate Rs 360 crore.

The BSCC plans to boost revenue through a revamped advertisement policy, targeting Rs 126 crore by auctioning hoarding rights along major corridors.

EJIPURA FLYOVER GETS A NEW DEADLINE

The ongoing Ejipura Elevated Corridor is targeted for completion by September 2026, the BSCC said.

Development of Bannerghatta Road from Dairy Circle to NICE Road has been proposed, along with road widening works on Subramanyapura Road and Begur Main Road at a combined cost of Rs 60 crore, it said.

Feasibility studies will be undertaken for grade separators at key junctions, such as Jayanagar Raghavendra Swamy Temple Junction and Vega City Junction, it said.

Begur and Madiwala lakes will be developed for tourism, with boating facilities proposed on a PPP basis.

Barrier-free elevated skywalk connecting Banashankari Temple, the Metro station, and the TTMC (Traffic and Transit Management Centre) at Rs 32 crore has been proposed.

BOOST FOR WEST'S INFRA

Under the Capital Support for Special Infrastructure Scheme, the BWCC Budget proposes to develop arterial and sub-arterial major roads and other infrastructure with a total grant of Rs 667.74 crore. A total of Rs 8 crore has been allocated for widening of main and sub-main roads.

Additionally, a grant of Rs 50 crore has been allocated for beautification of junctions, upgradation of footpaths and construction of skywalks.

Under the Chief Minister's Infrastructure Development Plan, a Rs 317.25 crore grant has been allocated to develop 174.49 km of ward roads.

BNCC FOCUSES ON WALKING

Much of the BNCC's Budget focused on making the City more walkable. Rs 18 crore has been allocated for all the wards for pedestrian path repair and to develop 1,000 km of well-structured pedestrian paths. Rs 50 crore has been allocated for developing junctions, constructing skywalks and related infrastructure.

The Budget also proposes the comprehensive development of Singapore Lake and the revival of non-functional lakes such as Banaswadi, Lingarajapura, Battaguntepalya and Ramachandrapura through detailed project reports.

INFRA PUSH IN NORTH

Rs 75 lakh per ward has been allocated for the BNCC's 72 wards for road, drainage and footpath repairs and maintenance. Rs 1.50 crore per ward has been earmarked for various development works, including ward-level roads and major road repairs, with Rs 2.25 crore allocated per ward. *—PTI*

THE BENGALURU WEST, SOUTH AND NORTH BUDGETS PROPOSED SEVERAL PROJECTS. HERE'S A BREAKDOWN

SOUTH CITY CORPORATION

Rs 440 cr with World Bank assistance for flood mitigation.

Rs 300 cr for Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Limited to support waste collection, disposal, and the creation of zero-waste wards.

Rs 260.67 cr for welfare programmes.

Rs 150 cr to construct the Corporation's administrative building near Banashankari Temple.

Rs 50 cr for junction beautification, pedestrian pathways, and skywalks over the 3 years.

Rs 31.99 cr for health under Brand Bengaluru initiative
18 pedestrian skywalks to be developed under public-private partnership (PPP) model.

Multi-level parking at major Metro station was proposed.

TOTAL EXPENDITURE AT RS 3,825.95 CRORE, SURPLUS OF RS 48.21 LAKH.

NORTH CITY CORPORATION

Rs 71.07 cr for housing.

Rs 10 cr for stormwater drains.

Rs 7.60 cr to distribute free laptops to students for 1,200 beneficiaries from minority communities pursuing degree courses.

Rs 9.40 cr for streetlights and related equipment.

Rs 11.12 cr for medical assistance to residents.

Rs 3.80 cr for stray dog shelters and Rs 1.50 cr to manage them.

TOTAL EXPENDITURE IS PROJECTED AT RS 4,341.20 CRORE.

WEST CITY CORPORATION

Rs 150.97 cr for infrastructure works in areas inhabited by SC, ST, Pourakarmikas (civic workers), backward and minority classes and specially-abled.

Rs 95.73 cr under the "Brand Bangalore Scheme" to upgrade hospitals

Rs 44.35 cr for education, including converting 5 schools to smart schools.

Rs 13.75 cr grant for the development of 49 lakes, with Rs 7.50 crore for maintenance.

Rs 5.50 cr for the establishment of an Urban Design Cell.

Rs 6 cr grant to set up Information Technology Cell and an Integrated Command and Control Center at GBA.

Rs 2 cr for stray dog shelters.

TOTAL EXPENDITURE AT RS 4,732.73 CRORE, WITH A SURPLUS BUDGET OF RS 8.42 LAKH

'I DECIDE MY GENDER'

Members of the National Network for Gender and Sexual Minorities protest at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Saturday, urging the Central government to withdraw the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, which removes self-identification of the gender —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

Socialist govt with VIP mindset: MLA on tickets

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

Senior BJP MLA S Suresh Kumar said the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government calls itself "socialist" but perpetuates a "VIP culture" over the State government's decision to allot two IPL tickets to Legislators. Kumar on Saturday said he does not want the tickets, even as both BJP and Congress MLAs had demanded them in the Assembly.

Kumar also expressed surprise that the government was eager to make such an announcement just 24 hours after the discussion in the Assembly, when other issues take longer.

"It is truly surprising and unfortunate that VIP culture

continues even under the rule of this self-proclaimed Socialist CM," Kumar said in a statement on Friday.

"Oh, I forgot! When RCB won the IPL last year, we all saw the scene where this same 'Samajwadi' chief minister took his grandson to the victory stage built in front of the Vidhana Soudha," he added, in an apparent reference to the stampede that killed at least 11 people last June.

"The fact that the Speaker himself joined the discussion (in the Assembly" surprised me," he added.

Senior BJP leaders have appeared divided over the issue. State BJP President BY Vijayendra and BJP MP Tejasvi Surya have distanced themselves from the row, while Leader of Opposition R Ashoka had spearheaded the charge, alleging that KSCA officials "disrespected" MLAs. *—PTI*

CALL IT DISCRIMINATION

Women move HC against menstrual leave

BENGALURU, 28 MARCH

A group of 15 women professionals has filed a petition in the Karnataka High Court challenging the State government notification granting one day paid menstrual leave per month to working women.

The women, employed in the state, filed the plea on 23 March, seeking to quash the government notification dated 20 November 2025.

They termed the policy "unconstitutional, discriminatory and violated" Article 14, 15, 16, and 21 of the Constitution.

The petition also seeks an interim order to stay the notification.

The government's notification grants one-day paid menstrual leave to all female employees.

The petition has been listed before Justice Anant Ramanath Hegde, who is already hearing petitions challenging the notification.

The matter has been posted for hearing on April 1.

The petitioners argued that the policy is a clear case of "benevolent sexism," where measures, although appearing protective, are rooted in paternalistic stereotypical assumptions about women, portraying them as weaker and less reliable, sources said. They claimed that it reinforces biases that women have fought for decades and will inevitably lead to discrimination against women in hiring and promotion. *— PTI*

A group of 15 women said the Karnataka menstrual leave policy was 'unconstitutional and discriminatory', citing a recent Supreme Court judgement against a mandatory nationwide policy —*x*

CM post not linked to bypoll results: Siddaramaiah

MYSURU, 28 MARCH

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Saturday asserted that there was no link between by-election results and Chief Minister's post. He claimed he would complete his full five years' term in office with the blessings of Congress High Command.

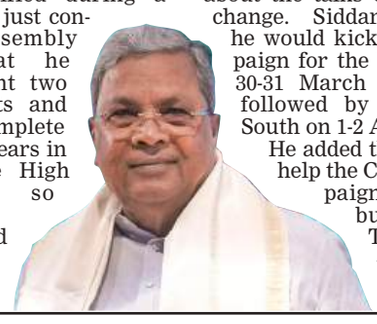
Speaking to reporters during his visit to Mysuru city, Siddaramaiah said he had already clarified during a debate in the just concluded Assembly Session that he would present two more Budgets and go on to complete his full five years in office if the High Command so desired.

He claimed that Congress would retain Davangere South and Bagalkot assembly segment in the ensuing by-polls. He however dismissed speculations that the outcome of the by-polls would have any political implications.

Siddaramaiah said the bypoll results are not a political referendum.

"Ours is a High Command party. We will abide by whatever the High Command decides," he said when asked about the talks of leadership change. Siddaramaiah said he would kick off his campaign for the bypolls from 30-31 March in Bagalkot followed by Davanagere South on 1-2 April.

He added that he would help the Congress campaign in Kerala, but not in Tamil Nadu. *— Salar News*



DMK to fight in 164 TN seats; allies get 70

Stalin, his son Udhayanidhi were renominated from Kolathur & Chepauk seats respectively

CHENNAI, 28 MARCH

The ruling DMK on Saturday named its candidates for 164 out of 234 constituencies, leaving 70 seats for its allies ahead of the 23 April Assembly polls. Meanwhile, Chief Minister MK Stalin and his son, Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin, were renominated from their current city seats, setting up direct contests with archrival AIADMK in several constituencies.

Winding up days of seat-sharing talks with allies, including Congress and Left, the DMK identified the constituencies for them. Minutes later, at a press conference at DMK headquarters Anna Arivalayam, Stalin released the names of 164 candidates of his party.

Stalin denied any "delay" in seat-sharing parleys, saying the "patient discussions" have ensured everybody is satisfied. Also, he was making efforts to ensure unity in the bloc.

AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami has been mocking the DMK, claiming it suffered a delay in seat-sharing talks, and that his party has taken the lead and entered campaign mode by finalising everything.

TN CM and DMK President MK Stalin,at a press conference at the party's headquarters Anna Arivalayam, in Chennai, on Saturday —PTI

Besides DMK's 164 seats, 11 alliance party candidates, including those from Vaiko-led MDMK, will contest on the ruling party's Rising Sun symbol, effectively making it 175 constituencies for the party.

Election to 234 Assembly seats in the state will be held on 23 April.

On Saturday, Stalin retained all but three of his 33 cabinet colleagues and some senior MLAs. He fielded over 60 persons for their maiden electoral battle, even as the candidates' composition included doctors, engineers and Phd holders. Besides, 18 women are in fray on behalf of the ruling party.

Stalin, the ruling DMK president, said he would contest once again from Kolathur. Udhayanidhi is seeking re-election from Chepauk-Triplicane, also in the city.

While talking to reporters, Stalin said the party's election manifesto would be released on Sunday. —PTI

AMMK UNVEILS CANDIDATES FOR 11 SEATS

NDA constituent Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK) on Saturday released the list of its 11 candidates for the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. AMMK founder TTV Dhinakaran also released the party's manifesto for the polls on the occasion. Former minister G Senthamizhan has been fielded from Saidapet constituency in Chennai, while ex-minister C Shanmugavelu has been nominated from Madathukulam (Tiruppur dt). Candidates were also named for Tiruchirappalli West, Periakulam (SC), Oddapidaram (SC), Poonamallee (SC), Mannargudi, Thiruvaiyaru, Karaikudi, Tirupathur and Nanguneri seats. —PTI

FILMMAKER SUNDAR MAKES POLL DEBUT

Popular film director **Sundar C** is set to make his electoral debut in the 23 April polls to Tamil Nadu Assembly as a candidate of the Puthiya Neethi Katchi, a constituent of AIADMK-led NDA from the Madurai Central constituency. PNK founder-president A C Shanmugam said that Sundar will contest the election under the AIADMK's 'Two Leaves' symbol. Sundar's wife and senior BJP leader Khushbu Sundar said he aims to be a "people's person" and serve state that has supported his career in cinema. —PTI

No transparency in TN seat selection: Cong MP Jothimani

CHENNAI, 28 MARCH

The Congress MP representing Karur, S Jothimani, has alleged a total lack of transparency in the party's constituency selection process in Tamil Nadu for the 23 April Assembly election, claiming the interests of the party have been "completely compromised." The Congress is part of the DMK-led alliance.

"There's no transparency in the party's constituency selection. Our view that seats should be chosen after discussions with transparency was rejected by those in charge," Jothimani said in a strongly-worded social media post on 27 March.

The MP's outburst comes at a time when major political players in the state, including the DMK and AIADMK, are finalising their strategies for the electoral battle, with newcomers like Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) also drawing attention. —PTI

No decision yet on WB voter appeal tribunals: CEO

KOLKATA, 28 MARCH

The implementation of tribunals to hear appeals from voters whose names were omitted from electoral rolls during West Bengal's SIR exercise remains undecided, a senior official said. Chief Electoral Officer Manoj Agarwal stated, "The Supreme Court has directed that those whose names are deleted will have the option to approach tribunals, but no final decision has been made on when and where they will function." The state government has proposed locations, with Calcutta High Court suggesting the Judicial Academy at New Town. Agarwal added, "After the HC's decision, it will be up to the state government to provide office premises." Software for voters to challenge rulings is ready and will be operational soon. —PTI

Visa scam: Delhi HC disposes of Karti's plea

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

The Delhi High Court closed proceedings on a plea by Congress MP Karti Chidambaram, seeking to defer hearing on charges in a money laundering case linked to the Chinese visa scam. His senior counsel said, "The plea is now infructuous as the trial court has already framed charges." Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma ordered the case be disposed of accordingly. Chidambaram's petition challenged a 2025 order dismissing his request to delay arguments until charges were framed in the visa scam case. The ED opposed, stating trials continue independently. The case involves allegations of visa issuance to 263 Chinese nationals in 2011 during P Chidambaram's tenure as Home Minister. —PTI

—ANI

Punjab veteran Congress leader Lal Singh dies at 84

PATIALA, 28 MARCH

Veteran Congress leader Lal Singh, known as the "Bhishma Pitamah" of Punjab politics, died at 84 in Mohali. He had complained of breathing difficulties earlier in the day and was admitted to hospital. Lal Singh's career spanned nearly five decades, serving as a powerful minister in Beant Singh's cabinet and as Punjab's finance minister under Amarinder Singh. Elected six times, he represented Dakala and Sanour. He is survived by son Kaka Rajinder Singh and daughter Rupinder Kaur. Condolences poured in from across the political spectrum; Amarinder Singh and Sukhbir Badal paid tributes. Punjab Congress Chief Warring called his death an irreparable loss. —PTI

Separatist leader gets bail in money laundering case

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

A Delhi court on Saturday granted bail to Kashmiri separatist leader Shabir Ahmed Shah in a money laundering case, observing that he had already been granted relief in the predicate NIA terror funding case. The court said Shah being granted bail by the SC was a material fact in his favour. It underlined that Shah was over 70 years old and had remained incarcerated for over eight years. Shah was asked to furnish personal bond of Rs 1 lakh each with two sureties. The court imposed stringent terms and conditions, including surrendering his passport and not leaving India during the trial period. He was alleged to have played a "substantial role" in facilitating a separatist movement in J&K. —PTI

2 EC officers fired after BJP seal row in Kerala

T'PURAM, 28 MARCH

Kerala Chief Electoral Officer Rathan U Kelkar on Saturday sent the Deputy CEO and a section officer back to their parent departments over an EC document sent to political parties that bore a BJP seal.

The decision was taken following an inquiry into the incident conducted by Additional CEO PB Nooh, IAS, a statement from EC said.

Based on the inquiry report, the Deputy Chief Electoral Officer and the section officer were relieved of their election-related duties and sent back to their parent departments, the statement added.

The controversy surfaced after the CPI(M) flagged the issue on the social media platform 'X', sharing an affidavit attached to a 19 March, 2019, letter sent to political parties that bore the BJP Kerala seal instead of EC's official seal.

Meanwhile, the BJP's Kerala General Secretary, **S Suresh**, said on Saturday that EC officials, including the state CEO, were colluding with the government and the CPI(M) to "undermine" polls in the state.

He referred to a recent row in which a BJP seal was found on a document issued by the EC to political parties. —PTI

Satheesan denies RSS support in 2001 polls win

A prominent Sangh Parivar leader, RV Babu, on Saturday claimed that UDF Chairman VD Satheesan had met RSS leaders in 2001 and 2006 for their support to win the state Assembly polls, an allegation denied by Congress leader. He said that that Babu was anti-Congress.

Meanwhile, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan rejected as "baseless", senior Congress Chief Ramesh Chennithala's claims of a Rs 700 crore scam in the procurement of software for primary cooperative societies. —PTI

Cong fires Palakkad councillor over sexual assault case

The Congress on Saturday expelled a councillor of the Palakkad Municipality from the party following a sexual assault complaint against him.

Palakkad District Congress Committee President A Thankappan said that Prashob C Valsan, a councillor from the 24th division, was removed from the party after reports of the incident surfaced."He may resign from the councillor post on moral grounds, but that is his decision. The party is also conducting an internal inquiry," he said. —PTI

Shah says West Bengal polls key to nation's security

KOLKATA, 28 MARCH

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday sought to frame the 2026 West Bengal assembly elections as a "battle over infiltration, national security and appeasement politics", while releasing a political "charge sheet" against the TMC government and asserting that the outcome would have implications not only for the state but also for the country's security.

Launching a broadside against the Mamata Banerjee government in a press conference here, Shah alleged that after 15 years of the TMC rule, West Bengal had become the country's "principal corridor" for infiltration due to "the ruling party's appeasement politics, corruption and political violence".

"Mamata Didi has always played the politics of the victim card. Sometimes she talks about her injury; sometimes she abuses the Election Commission. But the people of West Bengal now understand her victim card politics very well," he said.

Hitting out at Banerjee over her opposition to the SIR exercise, Shah accused her of manufacturing outrage to protect the TMC's "minority vote bank".

Additionally, Shah defended the EC's large-scale transfer of IAS and IPS officers in West Bengal, alleging that many officials in the state functioned as "cadres" of the ruling TMC and were unable to work independently. He claimed that the transfer of officers had led to fewer incidents of violence during Ram Navami celebrations this year. —PTI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah addresses the media after releasing a 'chargesheet' against the TMC government, in Kolkata —PTI

TMC accuses BJP of trying to polarise people in WB

KOLKATA, 28 MARCH

The TMC slammed Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday with a counter to his "chargesheet" against the Mamata Banerjee government, accusing the BJP of trying to polarise the people of poll-bound West Bengal.

The incumbent TMC questioned the BJP-led Centre over the prolonged violence in Manipur, women's safety in BJP-ruled states and the Centre's handling of illegal immigration.

Senior TMC leaders **Mahua Moitra**, Bratya Basu and Kirti Azad targeted Shah over his criticism of the TMC government on women's safety.

The counter-charges came after Shah released a political "chargesheet" against the TMC government, framing the polls as a battle not merely for Bengal, but for the country's security.

Shah alleged that after 15 years of TMC rule, West Bengal had become the country's "principal corridor" for infiltration because of the ruling party's appeasement politics, corruption and political violence.

West Bengal education minister Bratya Basu asked why the Union Home Ministry had "failed" to identify and deport illegal immigrants.

Meanwhile, Banerjee asserted that the BJP will lose power in the country in its attempt to destroy West Bengal.

Addressing a poll rally in Raniganj, she said that after winning the Assembly elections, she would bring all political parties along to "capture" Delhi.

She also accused the Election Commission of working at BJP's behest to delete voters' names in the SIR process. —PTI

> **Do you hear about any incident of rioting or clash during Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Jagaddhatri Puja, Eid, Chhat Puja, Christmas or when processions are taken out by the Jain community? Then why is a pious occasion like Ram Navami being used by them (BJP) to instigate violence and mayhem?**
>
> - Abhishek Banerjee, TMC leader

4 CASES FILED

Goa BJP councilor's son sexually abused 100 minor girls: Congress

PANAJI, 28 MARCH

Goa Congress Chief Amit Patkar on Saturday claimed the sex scandal in which the son of a councillor is an accused involves more than 100 minor victims and that the police were initially reluctant to register a case.

Soham, 20, son of Sushant Naik, a member of Curchorem Municipal Council in south Goa, was arrested on 21 March in four cases filed under Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, Goa Children's Act, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Information Technology Act for allegedly raping minor girls, filming their obscene videos and circulating them.

Addressing a press conference during a protest march organised by the Goa Pradesh Mahila Congress Committee, Patkar alleged, "The number of victims exceeds 100. The accused had been perpetrating the crime for the last three years. This sex scandal is much bigger than what it is being made out to be."

Amit Patkar —PTI

- The accused turned 21 this week. It means he was involved in the crime since he was 17-18.

Patkar claimed the minor girls from places like Curchorem, Margao, Vasco da Gama and Ponda are in urgent of counselling to ensure they do not take any extreme step under pressure. The accused turned 21 this week. It means he was involved in the crime since he was 17-18.

"The Curchorem police were initially reluctant to register the case and did so only after pressure from local residents. Why have Goa State Women's Commission, Goa State Commission for Protection of Child Rights and state education department not swung into action as yet," he questioned.

When contacted, an official of the Crime Branch, which is investigating the case, said three girls have come forward so far with complaints. —PTI

I was humiliated in Cong: Pradyut Bordoloi

GUWAHATI, 28 MARCH

Pradyut Bordoloi, a two-term MP from Assam who recently crossed over to the BJP, has claimed that he felt ignored in the Congress.

A Congress member for more than five decades and the chairman of the manifesto committee for the Assam Assembly polls, Bordoloi is contesting on a BJP ticket from Dispur.

Bordoloi claimed that a succession of wounds had built up, and it perhaps started during the Congress organisational election in 2022.

He alleged that he was facing humiliation in the Congress, was made to feel like a "persona non grata," after he supported Tharoor's candidature for the party president's post.

Mallikarjun Kharge won the elections and became the Congress president.

"After that, I felt there was a systematic move against me, although Kharge accepted me. Sonia Gandhi never discriminated against me," Bordoloi said.

He alleged that it was the second-rung leadership in the Congress who "systematically kept him aside." Bordoloi said the last straw was the attack on him during the 2025 Panchayat elections. "I came to know that the attack was engineered by a sitting Congress MLA as his closest confidante was arrested," he said. —PTI

- A Congress member for more than five decades and the chairman of the manifesto committee for the Assam Assembly polls, Bordoloi is contesting on a BJP ticket from Dispur.

No govt is as corrupt as BJP-led Assam govt: DKS

GUWAHATI, 28 MARCH

Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister and senior Congress leader DK Shivakumar alleged here on Saturday that there is no other administration as corrupt as the one in Assam, claiming that the entire state ministry, as well as their family members, are involved in it.

He questioned the BJP on its earlier charges of corruption against incumbent Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, claiming that anyone who joins the saffron party is "dipped clean".

Addressing a press conference, Shivakumar, said, "The type of administration run in Assam, the corruption going on here, no other state in the country has at such level. The entire ministry is involved. Some BJP leaders and even family members are involved in it."

Referring to BJP's 'booklet' with corruption charges against Sarma in 2015, during his tenure as a Congress minister, Shivakumar asked, "How did his old corruption

—SCREENGRAB

NCB Mumbai chief charged over builder's suicide

MUMBAI, 28 MARCH

Police have registered a case against Narcotics Control Bureau's zonal director Amit Ghawate in connection with the suicide of Navi Mumbai builder Gurunath Chichkar. Following a court order, Ghawate, a 2008 IRS officer, faces charges of abetment to suicide, criminal conspiracy, and extortion under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Chichkar shot himself on 25 April 2025, after allegedly being harassed by the NCB while pursuing his son Naveen, a drug syndicate 'kingpin' deported from Malaysia last year. A suicide note claimed he was fed up with harassment. The police initially registered an accidental death case, but Ghawate's role was later uncovered during the investigation. —*PTI*

Srinagar–Leh highway closed after avalanche

SRINAGAR, 28 MARCH

The Srinagar–Leh National Highway was shut on Saturday after an avalanche at Zojila Pass, as snow clearance operations continue. Seven people died, including a ten-year-old child, in the avalanche that occurred on Friday. Several vehicles were buried, and the highway remains closed for traffic. Officials said, "The highway is at present closed for all traffic, and intense snow clearance operations are underway." Once the debris is cleared, traffic is expected to resume. The Jammu and Kashmir police, the Army, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Ladakh Police, the State Disaster Relief Force, and civil authorities are involved in the rescue and recovery efforts. Search operations for those missing in the tragedy are going on on a war footing all over the disaster-hit area. —*PTI*

Speeding Thar runs over 2 kids near Gurugram

GURUGRAM, 28 MARCH

A Mahindra Thar vehicle hit two minor boys and their grandfather in Khod village, in Pataudi. Zayed Khan, 8 and Ishant, 10 died instantly, while their grandfather Subhash, 53, died later in hospital. The incident happened around 11pm when Subhash was returning home with his grandsons on Lokra Road. The police said the Thar was moving at very high speed, and the driver remains at large. The vehicle has been seized, and police identified the driver through the number plate, promising arrest soon. The deceased hailed from the Milkpur village, in the Bhiwadi district, of Rajasthan. —*PTI*

—PIXABAY

Nor'westers hit Odisha's Puri, Mayurbhanj dists

BARIPADA/PURI, 28 MARCH

At least three people died and three were injured as Nor'westers swept through Odisha's Mayurbhanj and Puri districts. Strong winds and thunderstorms struck Baripada around 11pm on Friday, causing two motorcycle riders, Ramdas Hansada and Nagen Murmu, to lose control and hit roadside trees, dying instantly. The injured are being treated at Baripada hospital. In Puri, Jagannath Behera was killed when a coconut tree fell during the storms. Several houses were damaged in Kanas, Delanga, and Satyaba. Authorities continue rescue efforts amid the destructive weather conditions. —*PTI*

India's maternal death rate still high, says study

Haemorrhage, hypertension responsible for most deaths

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

India is among the countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa with the highest number of maternal deaths in 2023 numbering 24,700, translating into a maternal mortality ratio of 116 per one lakh live births, according to a new global analysis published in 'The Lancet Obstetrics, Gynaecology, and Women's Health' journal.

Estimates suggest that Pakistan saw 10,300 maternal deaths the same year, while Ethiopia and Nigeria had 11,900 and 32,900 maternal deaths, respectively.

India's maternal mortality ratio in 2023 has declined by nearly 80 per cent after 1990, from 508 per one lakh live births to 116 per one lakh live births.

Researchers, led by those from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington and global collaborators, noted that although maternal deaths have declined in the last three decades, progress has slowed in recent years and remains uneven across countries.

India's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) stands at 88 per lakh births according to the 2021-23 data from the Sample Registration System —*FREEPIK*

The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2023 research provides the most up-to-date global assessment of maternal mortality trends across 204 countries in 2023, they said.

According to the latest Sample Registration System (SRS) 2021-23, the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) of the country stands at 88 per lakh live births.

A source in the Union Health Ministry said that the figure demonstrates progress in ensuring safe childbirth.

The world saw a total of 2.4 lakh maternal deaths in 2023, which equates to a global maternal mortality ratio of 190.5 maternal deaths per one lakh live births, a decline by more than one-third from 321 maternal deaths per one lakh live births in 1990, the researchers estimated.

However, 104 of the 204 countries have not met so far the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of achieving a maternal mortality ratio of under 70 per one lakh live births. Maternal haemorrhage and hypertensive disorders were responsible for the largest share of childbirth deaths globally. —*PTI*

Ram Navami procession leads to violence in Murshidabad district

KOLKATA, 28 MARCH

Suspected BJP and Sangh Parivar activists allegedly turned violent on Friday during a Ram Navami rally in a locality of Raghunathganj in Murshidabad's Jangipur, ransacking around 40 shops and setting several of them afire on Friday, triggering concerns over communal tension ahead of Assembly polls.

The flashpoint, Fultala, is predominantly a Muslim area..

Sources said tension began when a Ram Navami procession, accompanied by loud music and dancing, passed in front of a mosque located 200 metres from the Fultala crossing while Friday prayers were underway.

Objections raised by those praying reportedly led to a heated exchange, after which the procession moved towards the Fultala intersection. Eyewitnesses alleged that the marchers climbed onto the rooftops of Muslim houses and hoisted saffron flags, torched shops, and thrashed residents.

The site of the violence was around 500 metres of the Raghunathganj police station.

Security tightened in the Jangipur and Raghunathganj areas of Murshidabad, the police said —*ANI SCREENGRAB*

However, local residents claimed that the violence continued in the presence of the police and Central forces. Police resorted to a lathicharge only after repeated appeals.Among those injured was Jangipur municipality employee Abul Sheikh, 30, who suffered serious head injuries. BJP's Jangipur president Subal Chandra Ghosh, however, attributed the incident to provocation from "the other side."

The SP of Jangipur, Surinder Singh, said: "An unpleasant incident took place in Raghunathganj Bazar this afternoon. Police reached the spot and dispersed the mob."

Jangipur MLA and Trinamool candidate Zakir Hossain alleged a deliberate attempt to engineer communal unrest ahead of polls.

Prohibitory orders were imposed in Raghunathganj and Jangipur areas on Saturday after violent clashes during a Ram Navami procession the previous day. Thirty people have so far been arrested in connection with the violence, a senior police official said. — *Agencies*

IndiGo flight suffers engine failure, lands in Delhi

MUMBAI, 28 MARCH

A Delhi-bound IndiGo Boeing 737flightfromVisakhapatnam, carrying 160 passengers, made an emergency landing at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport on Saturday due to engine failure, sources said.

"An emergency was declared at the Indira Gandhi International Airport at 10.39 for IndiGo's VisakhapatnamDelhi flight 6E 579 due to an engine failure," a source said.

The flight landed at 10.59 am as per flight tracking website flightradar24.com.

Meanwhile, IndiGo, in a statement, said: "A technical snag was detected shortly before landing on IndiGo flight 6E 579 operating from Visakhapatnam to Delhi on 28 March 2026."

"As a precautionary step and in accordance with the standard operating procedure, the pilots requested priority landing and the aircraft landed safely at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi. The authorities were informed and the aircraft is undergoing checks," an IndiGo Spokesperson said. — *PTI*

SC warns against revealing raped minor girl's identity

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

The Supreme Court has strongly warned against disclosing the identity of a girl in a rape case and directed all high courts to ensure that the names of rape survivors and their kin are not mentioned in court orders.

In its 2018 judgement in the Nipun Saxena case, the SC had said, "No person can publish the name of the victim or even in a remote manner disclose any facts which can lead to the victim being identified."

A bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and N Kotiswar Singh attributed lapses in following the ruling to the general indifference of courts and "possibly even" the lack of awareness of the deep stigma that follows such offences.

The SC said that in 1983 the legislature had introduced a provision in the IPC to protect the identity of the of rape victims under Section 376 of IPC.

The amendment, it said, was made apparently to address a specific mischief that emerged starkly from the way sexual offence cases were handled: the public disclosure of a survivor's identity.

The bench thus directed that a copy of the judgment should be sent to all the high court registrars general.

It also mentioned Section 228A of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, which prohibits the disclosure of the identity of victims of sexual offences, including rape, to prevent social stigma. The observations came while setting aside an order of the Himachal Pradesh High Court, which reversed the conviction of a man in the rape of a nine-year-old girl, saying courts must not give undue importance to minor discrepancies. — *PTI*

FUEL HUNT

People queue up for LPG cylinders in UP's Meerut on Saturday—*PTI*

REVIVAL AT LAST

Admissions in Kota coaching centres jump 30% after slump

KOTA, 28 MARCH

Rajasthan's Kota, known as India's premier coaching hub for IIT-JEE and NEET, is experiencing a resurgence after a period of decline. Early signs show a 20-30 per cent increase in student enrolments for the 2026–27 academic session, signalling recovery following a sharp downturn over recent years. From 2023 to 2025, student numbers fell by nearly 30–40 per cent — from about 2.5 lakh aspirants and revenue of Rs 6,500–7,000 crore to 85,000 students and Rs 3,500 crore.

The new batches starting 25 March saw a surge of students and parents visiting the city, with admissions going on until 2 April. Firoj Khan, president of the Kota Station Area Auto Union, expressed hope for better times ahead, saying, "We hope for the return of the prosperous times of the past." MP Om Birla emphasised Kota's commitment to supporting students preparing for premier exams.

Over four decades, Kota has built a reputation for helping students crack exams like JEE and NEET. Many students from Kota secured top ranks this year. Industry leaders like Mittal believe this reaffirms confidence in Kota's education ecosystem. — *PTI*

1,036 buses checked in Andhra after fires

AMARAVATI, 28 MARCH

Andhra Pradesh Transport Minister M Ramprasad Reddy on Saturday said that around 1,000 buses have been checked across the state and 236 fined for lacking documents.

Reddy's remarks come in the context of four ghastly bus accidents claiming 45 lives, and injuring several others.

"We are taking action to prevent accidents. Across the state, we checked 1,036 buses. Cases have been registered, and penalties were imposed on 236 buses without proper documents," he said in an official release.

He said the authorities have undertaken checks at 16 points, including toll plazas and check-posts, across the state. The minister promised regular checking drives and stringent action against violations. He asserted that the government gives 'primacy to passenger safety' and called on everybody to obey the law. — *PTI*

- The minister promised regular checking drives and stringent action against violations. He asserted that the Andhra government gives 'primacy to passenger safety'

INFRA UPGRADE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Civil Aviation Minister Kinjarapu Ram Mohan Naidu, UP Governor Anandiben Patel and others, during the inauguration of the Noida International Airport in UP — *PTI*

PM opens Noida airport, calls for national unity

NOIDA, 28 MARCH

Prime Minister Modi urged citizens to work with dedication to tackle global challenges, and said that the government prioritises securing India's interests.

Inaugurating the Noida International Airport at Jewar on Saturday, the PM said, "Today marks the beginning of a new chapter in the journey towards a Viksit Uttar Pradesh." He said the BJP-led government has focused on expanding airport infrastructure and ensuring affordability. "We launched UDAN to ensure that air travel remains within the reach of ordinary families. In the last few years, around 1.6 crore people have travelled under this scheme," he said.

He added that the scheme has recently been expanded with an outlay of around Rs 29,000 crore, with plans to develop new airports in smaller cities and build around 200 helipads. He highlighted the lack of adequate Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) facilities in India. "An MRO facility has also been launched at Jewar," he said.

He said the government has made huge investments in the infrastructure in the last 11 years. "About Rs 17 lakh crore has been spent on expressways, and over 1 lakh kilometres of highways have been built," he said.

The first phase of the Noida airport, being developed at an estimated cost of Rs 11,200 crore, is envisioned as a multi-modal transport hub with seamless connectivity.

The project includes a cargo hub with an initial handling capacity of over 2.5 lakh tonnes annually, expandable to around 18 lakh tonnes. The airport's passenger handling capacity will be 12 million passengers per annum, scalable up to 70 million. — *PTI*

GOA NIGHTCLUB FIRE: COURT DENIES BAIL TO LUTHRA BROTHERS

PANAJI, 28 MARCH

A court in Goa has refused anticipatory bail to Saurabh Luthra and Gaurav Luthra, owners of the Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub, linked to a deadly fire in December 2025. The fire at the North Goa club in Arpora claimed 25 lives and injured 50.

The brothers, who fled to Thailand and were deported on 17 December, are now in Colvale jail. The Mapusa police have registered a forgery case, accusing them of providing fake documents to secure an excise licence.

Advocate Parag Rao said the judge rejected their bail applications. — *PTI*

Telangana to build grand places of worship: CM

HYDERABAD, 28 MARCH

Stressing the need to cleanse the Musi River, contaminated by industrial pollutants and sewage discharge, Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Saturday vowed to complete the river rejuvenation project and to build a grand temple, mosque, church and Sikh shrines as part of the project.

Speaking after performing 'bhumi puja' for the reconstruction of Omkareshwara and Machileshwara (Shiva) temples on the banks of Musi river at Manchirevula here, he said the state government would do 'Shiva Thandavam' (meaning taking tough measures) if anyone spreads false information about the project and attributes wrong motives to it.

Besides the grand Shiva temple complex, the government would build a mosque near Charminar, a Sikh gurdwara inspired by the golden temple at Gowliguda where Sikhs live in large numbers and a church at Nagole, he said.

All these places of worship would come up on the banks of the Musi River in Hyderabad, he said. — *PTI*

One month of war

Iranians wrestle with bombs & lost livelihoods

Iranians were already reeling from a shattered economy and mass killing of protesters when the first US-Israel bombs slammed into Tehran a month ago.

Now they are struggling to get by through a war with no end in sight, wrestling with lost livelihoods, damage to homes and the stress of explosions. Many wonder where it is leading — to the destruction of their homeland, the chaotic fall of the theocracy or its survival, wounded but more extreme.

"I think we've experienced everything bad possible, from the terrible atmosphere of January, the killings and arrests, to the war," said a 26-year-old designer in Tehran.

Daily explosions, near and far and unpredictable, shake and damage homes. Businesses are struggling. An unprecedented internet blackout since January has largely cut people off from the outside world and made communication within Iran more difficult.

The trauma of war comes on top of the shock from January, when hundreds of thousands across Iran marched in the biggest protests against the theocracy in decades — only to be met by security forces opening fire, killing thousands. Tens of thousands were detained, and arrests have continued.

The AP spoke to 10 people across Iran, most of whom spoke on condition of anonymity for their security.

Iranian Red Crescent emergency workers use a bulldozer to clear rubble from a residential building that was hit in an earlier US-Israeli strike in Tehran, Iran —PTI

BUSINESSES CRUMBLING

The designer, who with a partner runs a factory making leather fashion products, said her business was on the verge of closing.

"When the economy gets bad, nonessential goods are the first thing to be removed from the shopping cart," she said. Much of her sales are online, and the internet blackout practically reduced "the small sales to zero."

Since the January protests, she has had to live off her meagre savings, and the violence of the crackdown upset her so much she has not been able to return to work.

When the war began on 28 February, she moved to her parents' house. A few days later, the blast from a nearby strike damaged her apartment that she had just left. Like most Iranians, she doesn't have home insurance, so she will have to pay for repairs herself. She only leaves her parents' house to buy necessities.

TRYING TO TRACK STRIKES

The terrifying cadence of airstrikes shapes daily life in Tehran.

An engineer living in Tehran tries to find a pattern in strikes – are certain times safer? Recent nights saw explosions light up the skies. One evening, a blast shook his home as he had guests over.

They climbed up on the roof and tried in vain to figure out where it hit. "We didn't see any visible fire," he said.

He thinks the strikes are less frequent now, or maybe "our perception of it has changed," as everyone gets used to bombings. He feels anxious when family or friends go out on the streets and struggles to sleep. He had a job offer before the war but does not know if it is still there. Soon, he says, many will struggle with rent and bills.

Government workers, who make up a large part of the workforce, are still getting salaries. But private businesses are struggling to pay employees as they close for days on end or reduce hours.

The collapse of Iran's currency, largely caused by US and international sanctions over its nuclear program, triggered the protests late last year.

STRAINED RESOURCES IN RELATIVELY UNSCATHED NORTH

Many Iranians have fled to the north, which has been relatively unscathed.

One of the main cities, Rasht, has been packed with Iranians who fled from Tehran and elsewhere, straining local resources.

A doctor at a paediatric hospital said the number of patients has nearly doubled. Medicines are running out, he said, and patients now are asked to buy some basic supplies, including antibiotics or IV fluids, from the market.

The internet blackout is affecting his ability to access his patients' history and check correct dosages online, he said. It has also forced the doctor to set aside his own personal effort to document the casualty toll from the January crackdown because witnesses are unreachable and the online database is inaccessible.

He plays video games or watches television to pass the time. In a week-old binge, he is five seasons into "The Walking Dead," the American postapocalyptic horror drama series.

ANXIETY OVER FUTURE

Throughout, Iranians have been wrestling with widely mixed feelings over the war, the ruling theocracy and the future.

Authorities continue to organise pro-government street rallies, aiming to show public support. The feared paramilitary Basij, charged with internal security, has stepped up patrols even as it is targeted in airstrikes.

The engineer said decades of misrule have been hard on Iranians.

But he said that doesn't justify the US-Israeli attacks. He was angered by the deaths and the damage to infrastructure and military capacities.

He's trying to channel that anger into determination to rebuild. "I'm going to be stronger after this war. I will be damaged, just like my country. But that's it. This is life. We're going to make it better."

At the start of the war, US President Donald Trump called on Iranians to overthrow their leaders.

Now, he says he is negotiating with senior Iranian officials who he claims are "begging" for a deal, without naming them. Iran has denied any such talks are underway.

Some Iranians fear the war will leave behind a wounded but even more oppressive Islamic Republic.

One woman in her 40s said she feared negotiations more than war.

The doctor in Rasht said he viewed the war as "the last remaining option" for getting rid of the ruling clerics.

But he fears the way that the US and Israel are conducting it. If the US strikes a deal now, he said, it will only entrench the theocracy. —*PTI*

SALAR سالار

Food prices rise as Iran war sparks fertilisers shortage

Farmers around the world are feeling the squeeze of the Iran war. Gas prices have shot up and fertiliser supplies are waning due to Tehran's near shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for US and Israeli bombing.

The fertiliser shortage is putting the livelihood of farmers in developing countries — already troubled by rising temperatures and erratic weather systems — further at risk and could lead to people everywhere paying more for food.

The poorest farmers in the Northern Hemisphere rely on fertiliser imports from the Gulf, and the shortage comes just as planting season begins, said Carl Skau, Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme.

"In the worst case, this means lower yields and crop failures next season. In the best case, higher input costs will be included in food prices next year."

THE WAR HALTS SUPPLIES OF KEY NUTRIENTS

Iran is seriously limiting shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passage that usually handles about a fifth of the world's oil shipments and nearly a third of global fertiliser trade.

Nitrogen and phosphate — two major fertiliser nutrients — are under immediate threat from the blockade.

Supplies of nitrogen including urea, the most widely traded fertiliser that helps plants grow and boosts yields, are the hardest hit because of shipping delays and the soaring price of liquefied natural gas — an essential ingredient.

The conflict has restricted about 30 per cent of global urea trade, said Chris Lawson of CRU Group, a London-based commodities consultancy.

Some countries are already facing critical shortages, according to Raj Patel, a food systems economist at the University of Texas. For example, Ethiopia gets over 90 per cent of its nitrogen fertiliser from the Gulf through Djibouti, a supply route that was strained even before the war began in February.

"The planting season is now," Patel said. "The fertiliser isn't there."

Phosphate supplies, which support root development, are also under pressure. Saudi Arabia produces about a fifth of the world's phosphate fertiliser, and the region exports more than 40 per cent of the world's sulfur, a key ingredient and byproduct of oil and gas refining, Lawson said.

Even after the war ends, producers in the Gulf would need clear security guarantees before resuming shipments through the strait, and insurance costs would almost certainly rise, said Owen Gooch, an analyst with London-based Argus Consulting Services.

"The food system is fragile, and it depends on stable fertiliser supply chains to ensure farmers can produce the food the world relies on," said Hanna Opsahl-Ben Ammar of Yara International, one of the world's largest fertiliser companies.

SHORTAGES HIT AT A CRITICAL TIME

Fertilisers are generally applied just before or at planting, so crops miss key early growth stages and yields can fall when deliveries are delayed, even if supplies improve later.

The impact is already being felt in the United States and Europe, where the main planting season is underway, and it is expected to hit the first planting season in much of Asia in the coming months.

"Our crops out in the field need nitrogen now — the sooner the better — so they can get off to a good start, helping them establish themselves and build up reserves for the harvest later this summer," said Dirk Peters, an agricultural engineer who runs a farm outside Berlin.

Fertiliser prices are below the peaks seen after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but grain prices were higher then, helping farmers absorb the costs, said Joseph Glauber of the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Grain prices are lower now meaning margins are tighter and farmers may have to switch to less fertiliser-intensive crops — such as soybeans in the US — or apply less fertiliser, reducing yields. Lower yields can lead to higher consumer prices.

Other nations likely won't make up the shortfall. China, the world's largest producer of nitrogen and phosphate fertilisers, is prioritising domestic supply, and urea shipments probably won't resume until May, Lawson said. Plants in Russia, another major producer, are already running near full capacity, he said.

DEVELOPING NATIONS ARE VULNERABLE

The disruptions are already being felt across Africa, where many farmers rely on fertiliser imported from the Middle East and Russia.

Early heavy rains in East Africa have left farmers with about a week of dry weather to prepare fields and apply fertilizer, said Stephen Muchiri, a Kenya maize farmer and CEO of the Eastern African Farmers Federation, which represents 25 million smallholders.

Fertiliser shortages and price hikes hit farmers hard, forcing them to use less and leading to reduced yields. Even short delays can reduce maize yields by about 4 per cent in a season, Patel said, citing research from Zambia.

Governments can intervene by applying subsidies, promoting domestic production and controlling exports. —*PTI*

LETTERS

write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

AI reshapes election campaigns of major political parties in Kerala

A sea of people holding BJP flags and walking behind a political figure standing atop a jeep, waving to them, is not a public rally by Prime Minister Narendra Modi or Home Minister Amit Shah, but an AI-generated video of a saffron party candidate contesting the Kerala election.

In the AI-generated clip, BJP candidate PR Sivasankar, contesting the 9 April polls from the Ernakulam Assembly seat, appears to lead a large procession, with men, women and even children lining the streets, holding Indian tricolours and BJP flags.

The visuals are striking and convincing.

As campaigning gathers pace ahead of the crucial elections, war rooms of major political parties, including the Left, the Congress and the NDA, are busy creating such content to influence voters in an increasingly digitally driven society.

Compared to previous Assembly polls, political messaging this time is increasingly shaped by synthetic videos and edited visuals that blur the line between reality and fiction, making it challenging for voters to tell what is real and what is not.

The election war is aggressively fought in the digital space as well.

Congress candidate from Angamaly and sitting MLA Roji M John said the party is using AI-generated videos to convey its ideas to the people.

To target the ruling Left over the Sabarimala missing gold issue, the Congress has created AI-generated videos featuring Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and other Left leaders, alleging their involvement.

John added that, apart from this, individual candidates are also using AI to promote their campaigns in their respective constituencies.

"It's all issue based, like the Sabarimala gold loss matter. We did a lot of AI-based videos highlighting the role of the CPI(M) in it," he told PTI.

As part of efforts to increasingly reach out to voters, parties are even using AI-generated videos featuring their late leaders.

John said the Congress is using images of late party stalwarts such as Oommen Chandy to create AI content for its poll campaign.

Kannan, who manages Sivasankar's social media presence, said that most AI content generation has been delegated to third parties — such as influencers, public relations (PR) agencies, and bloggers — a trend common across political parties.

"Some of them are creating content using Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image to spread the party's message and highlight candidates' plans for a constituency and the state as a whole," Kannan said, speaking to PTI.

The content is created based on the voter base of a particular constituency and targeted groups, such as younger people who are not interested in politics, he said.

"We are also planning to launch a chatbot to better connect with voters," he added.

An AI-generated video released by the Congress shows Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and other Left leaders, alleging their involvement in the Sabarimala gold case —*SCREENGRAB*

Giving an example of AI-generated content, he said it can be used to depict the development that would take place in a particular area if a BJP candidate won.

"The development projects will be shown like a slideshow in the background of the candidate's image," Kannan explained.

The BJP ally Twenty20 party is also not averse to using AI-generated content as part of its political campaign, but some of the third-party agencies it has engaged for public relations work do not share the same view.

Jayan J Nath, whose agency is among several engaged by the party to manage its social media campaign, said he was not in favour of using AI-generated content as it raises "credibility" concerns.

"We promote candidates and the party through digital marketing. We use traditional platforms such as Google and Meta for this. It is very straightforward — no AI, nothing. We do not use any AI tools, as we do not want to do anything that could affect the credibility of the campaign," he said.

However, Leena, the campaign manager of Twenty20, does not agree with this view.

"It is not Twenty20's policy to avoid using AI," she said while speaking to PTI.

While the Congress and the BJP are actively using AI in their political campaigns, the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) has adopted a more minimalist approach.

Speaking to PTI, Nripan Das, the social media manager of State Finance Minister KN Balagopal, said AI has not been used extensively in the campaign of the senior CPI(M) leader, who is contesting from the Kottarakkara Assembly seat.

Not only those managing candidates' social media content, but even the public takes differing stances on the use of AI-videos.

Shaji M, a hairdresser from Thiruvananthapuram, sees it largely as entertainment and does not take them seriously.

Raju, a milk vendor from Adoor in Pathanamthitta district, expressed a similar view.

"I break into a smile every time I see AI videos related to the Sabarimala gold loss issue," he said.

On the other hand, Binu Sankar, a banker from Kollam, said that while such AI reels are amusing, "The issues they highlight remain in people's minds because they are presented humorously." —*PTI*

Houthis enter month-old Iran war, strike Israel

World trade on edge as Iran-backed rebels threaten US ships

DUBAI, 28 MARCH

Iranian-backed Houthi rebels joined the war by launching missiles towards Israel early on Saturday, their first since the West Asia war started. The Israeli military said it intercepted the projectile. The month-long war erupted after US-Israel attacked Iran, which retaliated with strikes against Israel and neighbouring Gulf Arab states.

Houthi Brig Gen Yahya Saree said on the rebels' Al-Masirah satellite television station that they launched a barrage of ballistic missiles toward "sensitive Israeli military sites" in southern Israel.

The assault calls into question whether the Houthis will target commercial shipping in the Red Sea corridor, as they did during the Israel-Hamas war. About USD 1 trillion worth of goods passed through the Red Sea annually before the war.

The Houthis attacked over 100 merchant vessels from November 2023 until January 2025 in response to the Israel's genocide in Gaza. If the Houthis, who control Yemen's capital, target vessels in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait off the Red Sea, it would not only further push up oil prices but destabilise "all of maritime security," said Ahmed Nagi, a senior Yemen analyst at the International Crisis Group, a research institution. "The impact would not be limited to the energy market."

About 12 per cent of the world's trade passes through that waterway, including oil, natural gas, grain and everything from toys to electronics, and it has become more crucial since the de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Saree warned the US not to send its ships to the Red Sea and expand its campaign. This could complicate Washington's deployment of the USS Gerald R Ford, which has been rerouted for repairs. The rebels have previously attacked US aircraft carriers in the region, before President Donald Trump responded by launching Wahsington's largest naval assault since World War 2 on Yemen in 2024.

First responders in Iran's Kermanshah after a US–Israeli airstrike destroyed more than ten residential units, on Saturday —IRAN RED CRESCENT

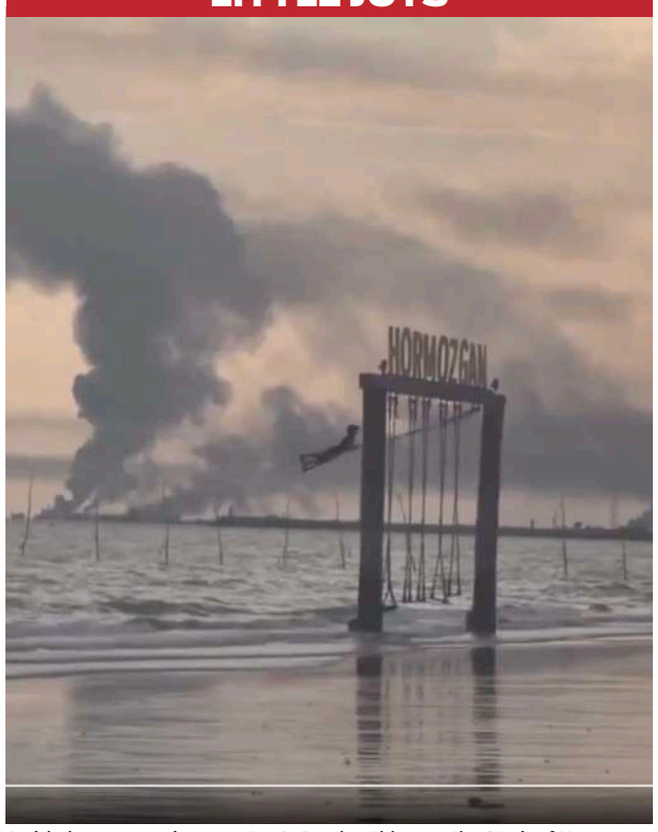
STRIKES CONTINUE

Explosions filled the air in Tel Aviv, where Israel's Fire and Rescue Service responded to 11 impact sites, while booms were heard in Jerusalem. Israeli airstrikes continued on Saturday as footage showed smoke rising from northeastern Tehran, a day after it struck several Iranian nuclear facilities as the country threatened "escalate and expand" its campaign. Drones continued across the Gulf, with Kuwait's airport sustaining significant damage, although no casualties were reported.

ISRAEL SLAUGHTERS JOURNALISTS IN LEBANON

An Israeli airstrike on southern Lebanon on Saturday killed three journalists covering the latest Israel-Hezbollah war. Israel said it targeted some of them because they Hezbollah operatives. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun called it a "crime that violates all laws," as Israel and Hezbollah continued to trade strikes. Israel has killed hundreds of Palestinian journalists in Gaza. —*PTI*

LITTLE JOYS



A girl plays on a swing near Iran's Bandar Abbas on the Strait of Hormuz as plumes of smoke from a strike rise behind her —SCREENGRAB

WEST ASIA WAR DAY-29

ALL EYES ON RED SEA

With the Strait of Hormuz virtually closed, the 30km Bab al-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden has now become a crucial waterway. If the Houthi rebels in Yemen begin targeting ships, oil prices could hit $200 a barrel by June, which has never happened, said Australian investment bank Macquarie.

12% of world's seaborne oil passes through the Bab el Mandeb Strait.

8% of world's LNG.

1/3rd of global seaborne fertiliser trade.

RED SEA MORE CRUCIAL NOW

Saudi oil giant Aramco has begun utilising its East-West pipeline to bypass the closure of Hormuz is and exporting to the Yanbu port city at the Red Sea.

4.1m bpd of crude oil was loaded and condensate Yanbu in the week ending 22 March, triple the 2025 average of 1.3m bpd.

1/3rd of all Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) loadings globally took place at Yanbu.

PREVIOUS PRECEDENT

Houthis targeted ships in 2024 during the Gaza genocide.

90% drop in traffic through the Suez Canal.

4% increase in oil prices

Why would we be there for NATO, Trump fumes

FLORIDA/ BERLIN, 28 MARCH

US President Donald Trump questioned the future of US commitment to NATO for not sending "a small amount of military armament" to help the US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

"I think that NATO made a terrible mistake," Trump said addressing the Future Investment Initiative Priority Summit in Florida on Friday. "They wouldn't send just even acknowledge what we were doing for the world and taking on Iran."

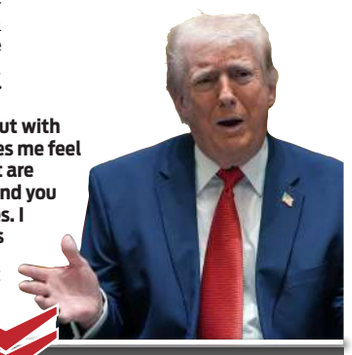
Trump said that NATOs's absence could have long term implications.

"We spend hundreds of billions of dollars a year on NATO. And we would've always been there for them. But now, based on their actions, I guess we don't have to be, do we?" he said. "Why would we be there for them if they're not there for us?"

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz sharply criticised Trump.

"What Trump is doing right now is not de-escalation, but a massive escalation with an uncertain outcome," Merz said late on Friday at an event in Frankfurt. "Is regime change really the goal? If that is the goal, I don't think they will achieve it."

Trump separately criticised Germany for saying the Iran conflict was not "our war". Trump said the Ukraine war was not "ours". —*Agencies*



I always like hanging out with losers, because it makes me feel better. I hate guys that are very, very successful, and you have to listen to their success stories. I like people that listen to my success

—Donald Trump, US President

'MBS didn't think he'd kiss my a*s'

Trump said that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman thought he would be dealing with a regular President "that was a loser" and didn't realise he'd be "kissing my ass". Trump said Saudi's de facto ruler "didn't think this was going to happen" but "now he has to be nice to me".

'Cuba's next, by the way'

Trump reiterated that Cuba was "next, by the way" when talking about the US strikes on Iran. "But pretend I didn't say that Cuba's next." Trump has repeatedly threatened to "take" Cuba, saying it would be an "honour", even as negotiations continue and the island nation has been crippled by American sanctions.

'Strait of Trump, I meant Hormuz'

Trump referred to the Strait of Hormuz as the "Strait of Trump", but then tried to correct himself. "Iran have to open up the Strait of Trump. I mean, Hormuz. Excuse me... fake news will say 'he accidentally said it'. Now there are no accidents with me."

'Love my legacy to as peacemaker'

Trump has said he would love his legacy to be a great peacemaker as he stopped eight wars, including between India and Pakistan last year, where nine planes were shot down. "It doesn't seem like it right now, but I think I am a peacemaker," Trump said.

Iran has previously allowed several tankers, including the Singapore-flagged cargo ship Pyxis Pioneer to cross the Strait of Hormuz to go to friendly nations —PTI

Iran opens Hormuz for humanitarian aid

DUBAI, 28 MARCH

Tehran has agreed to "facilitate and expedite" humanitarian aid through the Strait of Hormuz, Ali Bahreini, the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, said on Friday.

The aid plan would be the first breakthrough at the shipping chokepoint after a month of war. While markets and governments have largely focused on blocked supplies of oil and natural gas, the restriction of fertilizer threatens farming and food security around the world.

Bahreini said Tehran has accepted a request from the UN to let humanitarian aid and agricultural shipments move through the critical waterway.

"This measure reflects Iran's continued commitment to supporting humanitarian efforts and ensuring that essential aid reaches those in need without delay," Bahreini said on X.

Earlier, the UN had announced a task force to address the ripple effects the Iran war has had on aid delivery.

The primary focus of the task force is to develop and propose technical mechanisms specifically designed to meet humanitarian needs in the Strait of Hormuz, as Iran mulls formalising a "toll" for ships passing through the waterway. —*Agencies*

RUSSIA TO HALT ALL GAS EXPORTS FROM 1 APRIL

MOSCOW, 28 MARCH

Russia on Friday announced a ban on gasoline exports starting 1 April in order to prioritise domestic supplies and stabilise fuel prices amid the conflict in West Asia.

According to a statement issued by the Government of the Russian Federation, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that the ongoing crisis is causing fluctuations in global oil and petroleum product prices, although demand for Russian energy abroad remains strong.

The Russian Ministry of Energy reported that oil refining rates remain consistent with March 2025 levels, ensuring a stable domestic supply, and that industry companies have sufficient gasoline and diesel reserves along with high refinery capacity utilisation to meet internal demand.

Following the meeting, Alexander Novak instructed the Ministry of Energy to prepare a draft resolution banning gasoline exports. —*ANI*

Zelenskyy visits Gulf for drones

DUBAI, 28 MARCH

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Saturday said his nation wants to build long-term ties with West Asia including joint production, cooperation in the energy sector, investment and sharing battlefield experience.

He spoke with journalists during an official visit in Qatar.

"Simple sales do not interest us," Zelenskyy said. Zelenskyy said Kyiv has already signed a security-related 10-year agreements with Saudi and Qatar, with a similar agreement with the UAE expected in the coming days.

He visited met his Emirati counterpart Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Zelenskyy visited the UAE and met with his Emirati counterpart, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to discuss regional security in West Asia. —*PTI*

2 dozen US troops wounded in attacks on Saudi air base

DUBAI, 28 MARCH

Over two dozen US troops have been wounded in Iranian attacks on a Saudi air base in the past week.

Iran fired six ballistic missiles and 29 drones at Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan air base in a Friday attack that injured at least 15 troops, sources said.

US officials initially reported that at least 10 US troops were injured, including two with serious wounds.

The base was attacked twice this week, that injured 14 US troops.

Located about 96 km from the Saudi capital of Riyadh, the base is run by the Royal Saudi Air Force, but also used by US troops. —*PTI*

AROUND THE WORLD

FMs of Saudi, Egypt, Turkey to huddle in Pak

The Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey will meet their Pakistani counterpart in Islamabad on Sunday and Monday to discuss the West Asia war, the Foreign Office said on Saturday. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will also take part in the efforts, as Pakistan is seeking to mediate between the US and Iran.

No damage after Israel hit Iran's nuke plants: IAEA

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that there were no signs of radiation leaks after Israel hit nuclear sites in Iran. IAEA said there was "no radiation risk" after strikes at a heavy water plant at Khuzestan Steel Production Factory; and at Shahid Rezayee Nejad Yellow Cake Production Facility in Yazd.

B'desh deploys border guard at fuel depots

To prevent attempts of fuel hoarding, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) has been deployed at fuel depots, the BGB said in a statement on Saturday. Additionally, to prevent fuel smuggling across borders, intensified land and river patrols are being conducted and checkpoints have been established for inspections.

US eases sanctions on Venezuela's mineral sector

WASHINGTON, 28 MARCH

US Treasury Department has lifted more sanctions on Venezuela's gold, oil, diamonds, bauxite, and rare earths, including coltan, to encourage US investment.

In a statement by the Treasury's Office, firms can now pursue contracts in the minerals sector, including with state-owned Minerven. The move aims to revitalise the Venezuelan economy, with the US eager for firms to access the country's natural resources. The ease on sanctions follow US's efforts to restore ties under interim leader Delcy Rodriguez, especially after ex-president Nicolas Maduro's detention in January. Maduro is seeking dismissal of drug charges in a US court, his lawyer argues US actions violate his rights. —*Agencies*

DAY 1 UNDER BALEN SHAH

Nepal Ex-PM Oli's arrests sparks protests

KATHMANDU, 28 MARCH

A day after Nepal's newly formed Prime Minister Balendra Shah led government decided to arrest former prime minister KP Oli and former home minister Ramesh Lekhak for their alleged action against last year's Gen Z protests, their supporters have taken to streets in protest against their leaders' arrest.

Both Oli and Lekhak have been taken into detention at the Kathmandu District Police Circle in Bhadrakali, said the police. The probe commission has recommended a jail sentence of three to ten years for the offence.

Dozens of CPN-UML cadres took to the streets, burning tyres to protest the detention of their party chair. The protesters set fire to the report of the High-Level Investigation Commission, formed to investigate atrocities committed during last year's September Gen-Z protest.

Nepal police clear the street as ex- PM KP Oli is taken for medical checkup after being arrested in Kathmandu, Nepal —*x*

"We will avenge till death. This is totally a political move," a cadre of CPN-UML said as he stood beside a burning tyre set on fire in Kathmandu.

Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) has called a large-scale demonstration at 12 noon on Sunday. They plan to submit protest letters to Chief District Officer (CDO) offices in protest against the arrests.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Lennist) secretary, Mahesh Basnet, called Oli's arrest a "political revenge" and said the Balendra Shah-led government is displaying prejudice.

Home Minister Sudhan Gurung defended the action, saying on social media that "This is not a revenge against anybody, just the beginning of justice." —*Agencies*

Didn't ask Ukraine to cede Donbas, says Rubio

PARIS, 28 MARCH

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Friday rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's assertion that the Trump administration is demanding that Kyiv hands over its eastern Donbas region to Russia.

Zelenskyy had said in an interview that the US was making its offer of security guarantees for Ukraine contingent on the ceding of the Donbas region, the industrial heartland long coveted by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Moscow's forces occupy the bulk of the region, but have not seized a strip of land that is among the most heavily fortified parts of the front line.

"That's a lie," Rubio told press following a Group of Seven meeting in France on Friday.

4 people were killed by Russian strikes —UKRAINE EMERGENCY SERVICE

He also denied Zelenskyy's assertions and said the US had only passed along Russia's demands.

"We've told the Ukrainian side what the Russians are insisting on," he said.

"We're not advocating for it. It's their choice to make."

Meanwhile, Russian strikes continued, with at least four people killed in the Ukrainian cities of Odesa and Kryvyi Rih on Saturday. More than a dozen others were wounded, officials said. —*Agencies*

– FREEPIK

Rentomojo files draft papers for Rs 150 crore IPO

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

Online furniture and appliance rental platform—Rentomojo Ltd—filed preliminary papers on Friday with markets regulator Sebi to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO). The proposed IPO comprises a fresh issue of equity shares aggregating up to Rs 150 crore and an offer-for-sale of up to 2,83,99,567 equity shares by existing shareholders. The company proposes to utilise the proceeds from the fresh issue towards payment of debt, lease rentals or licence fees for its warehouses and experience stores, and for general corporate purposes. On the financial front, revenue from operations stood at Rs 265.96 crore for the fiscal year 2025 and profit after tax at Rs 43.11 crore for FY2025. —*PTI*

– ANI

Govt revises EV scheme, e-scooter deadlines set

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

The government has revised the PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PM E-DRIVE) Scheme, setting new deadlines and unit caps for e-scooters and e-rickshaws. The Centre has revised the guidelines under the Rs 10,900 crore PM E-DRIVE scheme, whereby electric two-wheelers registered by 31 July 2026 and electric three-wheelers registered by 31 March 2028, are eligible for incentives. The maximum ex-factory price to avail an incentive is capped at Rs 1.5 lakh for electric two-wheelers and Rs 2.5 lakh for electric three-wheelers. The PM E-DRIVE Scheme is a fund-limited scheme. The total payout under the Scheme shall be limited to the scheme outlay of Rs 10,900 crore.—*PTI*

'India's growth faces 4-yr setback amid war'

Bernstein says India may face double-digit inflation, 2-3% economic growth

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

India's macro outlook faces rising risks amid escalating US-Iran tensions and a sustained spike in crude oil prices, noted a report by global equity research and brokerage firm Bernstein.

The report cautions that the current geopolitical shock could expose structural vulnerabilities in the Indian economy if it persists, noting that "a prolonged period of elevated crude and tighter external financing conditions could play out for India's macro.

The report underscored that the crude price threatens to push inflation back above the tolerance range, while also flagging risks to growth and external balances.

In a worst-case scenario, the repercussions could be severe, including "double-digit inflation, economic growth in 2-3 per cent range, rupee beyond 110 and nifty going well below 20,000.

The report expects "realistic chances of inflation breaching 6 per cent this summer," which could delay monetary easing, with "rate cuts to get pushed for two quarters at the least, and GDP growth to taper.

On external accounts, elevated crude prices are likely to widen imbalances.

The report warning that "it is only a matter of time before 97-98 levels for the Rupee are breached" if hostilities persist.

Bernstein emphasised that structural damage may already be underway, stating "a structural change has happened already," with crude unlikely to return to earlier low levels this year.

Meanwhile, global markets may be overlooking a significant geopolitical shift, according to a Systematix Research report, which warns that this could lead to prolonged uncertainty and economic disruption.

The global economy is being driven by sharply changing narratives from the US administration and Iran's responses,with investors struggling to price in the long-term implications.

Disruptions to crude and gas supplies could persist even in the event of de-escalation.

The report said that "global debt surged by nearly USD 29 trillion during 2025, pushing the worldwide total to a record USD 348 trillion.

In India, there is stagflation risks driven by high oil prices and weak demand. —*ANI*

The report stated that the crude price threatens to push inflation above the tolerance level, while also flagging risks to growth and external balances —*AI IMAGE*

Adani delivers 2,000 'Prahar' light machine guns to Army

The 7.62 mm-calibre weapon has been manufactured by Adani Defence and Aerospace at its Small Arms Complex in Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh —*PTI*

GWALIOR, 28 MARCH

In a boost to the Indian Army's firepower, a defence major on Saturday delivered the first batch of 2,000 'Prahar', light machine guns (LMGs), manufactured under the 'Make in India' initiative.

The 7.62 mm-calibre weapon has been manufactured by Adani Defence and Aerospace at its Small Ams Complex located on the outskirts of Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh.

A ceremony was held on its premises on Saturday to hand over the LMGs to the Army, which was attended by A Anbarasu, DG Acquisition, Ministry of Defence, Ashish Rajvanshi, CEO of Adani Defence and Aerospace, and other senior officials of the private firm.

Anbarasu later flagged off a series of trucks carrying the first batch of the LMGs meant for the Army.

Interacting with reporters after the flagging off, Rajvanshi said, "The journey that has begun today took us six years, starting from bid submission, and we have delivered it 11 months ahead of schedule."

"The original timeline, which was given to us by the customer, was over seven years, but I can assure you that in the next three years, the full order will be delivered," he added.

A company spokesperson said the total order for the LMGs stands at around 40,000.

Anbarasu, in his address at the event, praised the firm for saving several months by delivering ahead of schedule, and said it shows there is the ability to "race and fire" against time in turning contracts into deliveries.

The government stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the defence industry partners, he said. —*PTI*

India cautions WTO members not to weaponise 'transparency'

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

India has cautioned World Trade Organisation members against weaponising "transparency" to justify trade retaliation or challenge legitimate domestic policies, saying it should be backed by sustained capacity-building support.

"Transparency" is a key component of the technical barriers to trade agreement of WTO. Under this, member nations have to regularly and clearly share information about their trade policies, subsidies, and regulatory measures.

The US has been pushing for stricter rules on mandatory disclosures as part of the WTO reform proposal. It alleges that many countries do not timely notify subsidies, tariffs, or policy changes to the WTO.

Developing member nations have serious reservations about how the US wants to implement it. These emerging economies oppose penalties for failure to notify information, arguing that many countries lack capacity.

The issue was flagged on 27 March by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal in a session on 'level playing field issues' of the 14th ministerial conference (MC14), which is underway in Yaounde, Cameroon. The MC is the highest decision-making body of the 166-member multilateral organisation, which meets once every two years.

Consensus-based decision-making is the bedrock of WTO's legitimacy, and it is important for the WTO not to ignore the sovereign right of members to not bind themselves to rules they disagree with

- Piyush Goyal, Commerce and Industry Minister

India has also stressed on the importance of all members to have a fair opportunity to build productive capacity, create employment opportunities for its people and participate meaningfully in global trade.

Meanwhile, commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said the country supports a time-bound restart of reform efforts with milestones based on a more robust evidentiary analysis and through engagement with submissions and Ministerial Decisions. —*PTI*

Nokia to lay off 14K employees, including Indian workers

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

Finnish giant Nokia has begun preparing for layoffs across its India teams as part of a broader restructuring plan to reduce its workforce by as much as 14,000 employees.

As per a report from Moneycontrol, Nokia is expected to reduce its global workforce by 20 per cent. The Finnish giant currently has a workforce of over 74,000 employees, withover 17,000 workers in India.

Nokia's India performance is said to be declining. The company's net sales dropped 15 per cent year-on-year to 393 million euros (roughly Rs 4,290 crore) in the fourth quarter of 2025. In comparison, the company had reported India net sales of 463 million euros (roughly Rs 5,000 crore) in the same quarter a year earlier.

Nokia has appointed Samar Mittal as India Country Business Leader and Vibha Mehra as India Country Manager from 1 April. Mittal will oversee the entire customer portfolio end-to-end, a role with greater operational control than his predecessor.

The latest restructuring is expected to result in job cuts across various functions in India, including common and global roles. It is believed that the merger of Nokia's cloud and network services, with mobile networks, in 2023, has created duplication. The company has been planning more job cuts in Europe. —*Agencies*

Google nears $5B deal to fund Anthropic's 500MW data centre

CALIFORNIA, 28 MARCH

Google is expected to finalise its backing of a multibillion-dollar deal to power a 2,800-acre data centre leased by Anthropic in Texas within the coming weeks, reports the Financial Times.

The project is expected to deliver about 500 megawatts by 2026, with plans to expand to roughly 7.7 gigawatts. The lease for the project was signed in early March, with the centre's construction already underway at the Texas site, which has received early-stage debt from asset manager Eagle Point.

A key advantage of the site is its proximity to major gas pipelines run by companies like Enterprise, Energy Transfer, and Atmos, allowing Nexus to use its own gas turbines and avoid price surges to ultimately reduce reliance on grid connections.

Google is reportedly offering construction loans for the operator of the site — Nexus Data Centres. The financing could total over USD 5 billion. The support from Google's parent Alphabet should allow the project to raise financing at a lower cost. —*Agencies*

The lease for the project was signed in March, with the data centre's construction underway in Texas in the US—*FREEPIK*

PESB recommends Ashok K Panda for SAIL CMD post

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

The Public Enterprises Selection Board (PSEB) has recommended Ashok Kumar Panda, director (finance) of Steel Authority of India Ltd (SAIL), for the top post at India's largest public-sector steel-making entity.

Panda was among the 10 shortlisted candidates interviewed for the post of chairman and managing director (CMD) at SAIL.

The top post will fall vacant after the term of the present CMD, Amarendu Prakash, ends on 2 April.

Panda is a seasoned finance professional with over three decades of experience in accounting, costing and budgeting, annual business planning, project commercial activities, treasury operations and more. —*PTI*

Govt to borrow Rs 8.20L cr, including Rs 15L cr green bonds

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

The Government of India, in consultation with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), has finalised its borrowing programme for the first half (H1) of the financial year 2026-27.

According to the official statement of the finance ministry, the gross market borrowing for FY27 was budgeted at Rs 17.20 lakh crore.

However, following the conduct of switching operations in government securities (G-Secs) after the Budget presentation, the gross borrowing has been revised down to Rs 16.09 lakh crore.

Out of the revised borrowing, Rs 8.20 lakh crore, accounting for 51 per cent, is planned to be raised in H1 through issuance of dated securities. This includes Rs 15,000 crore through Sovereign Green Bonds (SGrBs).

The government will complete the Rs 8.20 lakh crore borrowing through 26 weekly auctions.

The maturity-wise share of borrowing (including SGrBs) are as follows: 3-year (8.1 per cent), 5-year (15.4 per cent), 7-year (8.1 per cent), and 10-year (29.0 per cent). —*PTI*

TO DRIVE DEMAND

Old iPhones get pricier as Apple withdraws retail incentive

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

Older iPhone models in India are likely to see a rise in effective prices after Apple discontinued a key incentive programme for offline retailers, a report by Moneycontrol stated.

The programme, aimed at driving demand, allowed retail partners to offer cashback schemes and promotional discounts on previous-generation iPhones. Its withdrawal is expected to limit the scope for such offers, making older devices less affordable.

Retailers may no longer be able to absorb price cuts, leading to a likely increase of up to Rs 5,000 in the effective cost of some older iPhone models.

These models typically attract buyers looking for relatively lower-priced entry points into Apple's ecosystem.

Offline sellers could find it difficult to match earlier deal levels that were partly funded by Apple.

The move indicates a change in Apple's India strategy, with a greater emphasis on maintaining pricing discipline. By curbing retailer-led discounting, the company may be seeking tighter control over how its products are priced in the market.

The step could also help narrow the pricing gap between older and newer models, potentially nudging consumers towards the latest iPhone lineup.

For buyers, the development may translate into fewer discounts outside festive sales or exchange offers. This could raise the entry cost for those considering older iPhones.

Retailers may see reduced flexibility in offering promotions, affecting both demand and margins in the near term.

India is an important market for Apple.

The new move suggests a recalibration in how the company drives sales, shifting away from incentive-backed discounts towards more controlled pricing and targeted offers.

While selective price revisions and financing schemes may continue, steep discounts on older iPhones through offline channels could become less common. —*Agencies*

The withdrawal of retain incentive will limit the scope of cashback schemes and promotional discounts, making old devices costlier —*IPHONE*

'Cyber threats moving from data theft to physical life risks'

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

With cyber-attacks increasingly targeting critical infrastructure such as healthcare and power grids, the global threat landscape has moved beyond mere data theft to pose direct risks to human lives, a senior cybersecurity expert has said.

Gaurav Shukla, Partner and Leader - Cyber at Deloitte South Asia, noted that the convergence of Information Technology (IT) and Operational Technology (OT) has expanded the attack surface, making sectors like aviation, transport, and public utilities highly vulnerable.

"For the past two years, we observed that cyber threats were not limited only to the IT systems. They were pervading beyond IT systems, and the perpetrators were targeting more of the critical infrastructure A lot of digital transformation, which has taken place in the last few years or so, has expanded the attack surface, and whenever the attack surface increases, it provides more opportunities for the attackers to come and cause disruption."

The country's Digital Public Infrastructure, commonly known as India Stack, has reached the world stage. Deloitte is advising about 24 countries to build their own version of India Stack. —*PTI*

RCB FEVER GRIPS NAMMA BENGALURU

A crowd gathers as RCB players arrive by bus at M Chinnaswamy Stadium for the IPL T20 opener against SRH in Bengaluru on Saturday. SRH carry banners to the stadium; a child gets RCB face painting; a cop directs the crowd as fans click pictures with RCB memorabilia; RCB supporters wear Virat Kohli masks —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

MI eye winning start against KKR

Rejuvenated Rohit will look to rediscover his form this IPL season

MUMBAI, 28 MARCH

Mumbai Indians will launch their bid to end a five-year Indian Premier League title drought when they face a depleted Kolkata Knight Riders in their opener on Sunday.

Five-time champions between 2013 and 2020, Mumbai Indians have not lifted the trophy since, but enter IPL 2026 with a well-rounded squad and renewed belief. After finishing third last season under Hardik Pandya, losing to Punjab Kings in Qualifier 2, they appear well-equipped to mount a serious title challenge.

A rejuvenated Rohit Sharma will look to rediscover form, while the core of India's T20 World Cup-winning side — Suryakumar Yadav (captain), Pandya, Tilak Varma and Jasprit Bumrah — adds depth and pedigree. Their overseas resources are equally formidable, featuring Ryan Rickelton, Sherfane Rutherford, Corbin Bosch, Mitchell Santner, Will Jacks, AM Ghazanfar and Trent Boult, who is expected to partner Bumrah.

With experienced Indian bowlers Shardul Thakur and Deepak Chahar, and the finishing prowess of Naman Dhir, Mumbai's primary challenge will be settling on the right combinations and avoiding their customary slow starts.

In contrast, Kolkata Knight Riders arrive with concerns. Led by Ajinkya Rahane, they are missing key bowlers Mustafizur Rahman (released) and injured duo Akash Deep and Harshit Rana. This leaves their attack unsettled, placing added responsibility on Varun Chakravarthy and potentially Zimbabwe's Blessing Muzarabani.

KKR's squad retains batting strength, with Rachin Ravindra and Matheesha Pathirana, both formerly of Chennai Super Kings, alongside Tim Seifert, likely their first-choice wicketkeeper. All-rounders Cameron Green and Sunil Narine further bolster their options.

However, with gaps in their bowling unit, KKR face an uphill task against a balanced Mumbai side eager to start strongly. The match begins at 7.30pm. —*PTI*

DHONI SET TO MISS FIRST TWO WEEKS OF IPL DUE TO CALF STRAIN

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

Chennai Super Kings icon MS Dhoni is set to miss the first two weeks of the IPL due to a calf injury, the franchise said on Saturday.

"MS Dhoni is currently undergoing rehabilitation for a calf strain. As a result, he is likely to miss the first two weeks of TATA IPL 2026," said CSK in a statement.

Dhoni has continued playing the IPL ever since retiring from international cricket in 2020. The 44-year-old's future in the IPL becomes a topic of intense discussion following CSK's campaign every season. Considering Dhoni only plays the IPL, it becomes tougher to maintain match fitness. Though Ruturaj Gaikwad is the captain of the side, Dhoni is the de facto leader of the franchise having stayed with them since 2008 barring the time they were suspended from the competition. —*PTI*

HC directs takedown of AI content using Gambhir's identity

NEW DELHI, 28 MARCH

The Delhi High Court has ordered the takedown of fake AI-generated content misusing Gautam Gambhir's identity, directing platforms to remove such material within 36 hours. In an order dated 25 March, Justice Jyoti Singh restrained defendants from creating deepfakes, face-swaps and fabricated statements. The court accepted submissions that Gambhir's persona was being to sell products. Amazon and Flipkart, and Meta and Google, were told to remove listings and disclose details of those responsible. —*PTI*

Novak Djokovic pulls out of Monte Carlo Masters

MONACO, 28 MARCH

Novak Djokovic has withdrawn from the Monte Carlo Masters after previously skipping the Miami Open with a right shoulder injury. Organisers announced the decision on social media, wishing the 24-time Grand Slam champion a swift return. The 38-year-old has not played since his three-set defeat to Jack Draper in the BNP Paribas Open earlier this month. Last year, Djokovic exited in the second round in Monte Carlo, losing to Alejandro Tabilo. —*PTI*

Praggs braces for challenge as Candidates is set to begin

PAPHOS, 28 MARCH

India's Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa faces a stern test as the Candidates Tournament begins in Paphos, Cyprus, on Sunday, featuring an elite eight-player field in the Open section.

The winner of the double round-robin event, where each participant plays the others twice, will earn the right to challenge reigning world champion D Gukesh later this year.

On current form, American Fabiano Caruana starts as favourite, with compatriot Hikaru Nakamura, who qualified via rating, close behind. Dutch Grandmaster Anish Giri is also in strong touch and could emerge as a serious contender if he builds momentum.

The field is completed by

China's Wei Yi, Uzbekistan's Javokhir Sindarov, Russia's Andrey Esipenko, and Germany's Matthias Bluebaum, making for a fiercely competitive line-up.

Praggnanandhaa's build-up has been mixed. After a stellar 2025 season, where he topped the FIDE circuit to qualify, his form dipped towards the end of the year and into the Tata Steel Masters in February. However, the Indian has since taken a break from competition and arrives refreshed following focused preparation.

Sindarov, the youngest participant and reigning World Cup champion, is the tournament's dark horse, while Wei Yi and Giri are known for their solidity. Esipenko remains dangerous, and Bluebaum, though lowest-ranked, has been consistent.

In the women's section, former world champion Tan Zhongyi leads a competitive field. Anna Muzychuk replaces Koneru Humpy, who withdrew due to security concerns. India's Divya Deshmukh and R Vaishali will also be in focus.

The event offers a USD 1 million prize pool, with play starting Sunday. —*PTI*

Iran soccer star threatened with asset seizure by state

TEHRAN, 28 MARCH

Iran forward Sardar Azmoun has reportedly been threatened with asset seizure by the country's judiciary, according to semiofficial media, amid wider tensions surrounding government critics.

Azmoun, 31, is among 16 individuals listed for potential confiscation of property by authorities in Golestan province, the Fars news agency reported. The move follows warnings from Iran's hardline judicial leadership targeting public figures deemed critical of the state.

The striker, who has scored 57 goals in 91 appearances for Iran — second on the all-time list, appears increasingly unlikely to feature at the upcoming World Cup.

He was omitted from recent warm-up matches, reportedly due to a social media post that angered authorities during the ongoing conflict involving the United States and Israel. Azmoun has previously expressed support for anti-government protests.

Now playing for Dubai-based Shabab Al-Ahli, he has also turned out for European clubs including Roma, Bayer Leverkusen and Zenit St Petersburg. Meanwhile, Iran's national team used a 2-1 defeat to Nigeria in Antalya to honour victims of a deadly February missile strike on a primary school in southern Iran that killed more than 165 people, most of them children. —*PTI*

SINNER TO FACE LEHECKA IN THE MIAMI OPEN FINAL

MIAMI, 28 MARCH

Jannik Sinner extended his dominant run to reach the Miami Open final, defeating Alexander Zverev 6-3, 7-6 (7-4) at Hard Rock Stadium.

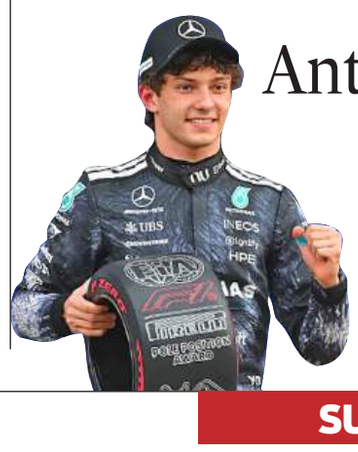
The world No. 2, who missed last year's event due to a three-month suspension, is now on the brink of a second Miami title in three years and could become the first man since Roger Federer in 2017 to complete the "Sunshine Double". He has won 32 consecutive sets at ATP Masters 1000 level and claimed the Indian Wells title earlier this month.

Sinner fired 15 aces and secured his seventh straight win over Zverev, sealing victory in a tight second-set tiebreak. He will face Czech 21st seed Jiri Lehecka, against whom he holds a 3-0 record.

Lehecka advanced to his first Masters 1000 final with a commanding 6-2, 6-2 win over Arthur Fils, finishing with six aces and no break points conceded.

In the women's final, top seed Aryna Sabalenka will face Coco Gauff in a blockbuster clash. —*PTI*

Antonelli, Russell take pole at Japanese Grand Prix



SUZUKA, 28 MARCH

Kimi Antonelli continued his remarkable start to the 2026 season by taking pole position for the Japanese Grand Prix, leading a Mercedes one-two ahead of teammate George Russell.

The 19-year-old, fresh from his maiden win in China, clocked 1:28.778 at Suzuka — three-tenths quicker than Russell in a dominant display for Mercedes, who have controlled the early part of the season. Russell, winner in Australia, admitted the car "did not feel the same" after struggling through qualifying.

McLaren's Oscar Piastri will start third alongside Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, with Lando Norris and Lewis Hamilton on the third row.

Antonelli described his lap as "clean" and stressed the importance of a strong start on Suzuka's tight, technical layout, where overtaking is more difficult despite this season's new regulations making cars smaller and more agile.

Piastri, yet to start a race this season after setbacks in Australia and China, took encouragement from McLaren's improved showing but conceded Mercedes still hold the edge on pace and grip. —*PTI*

SUSPECTED DRUG USE

Tiger Woods gets bail hours after arrest in DUI case

JUPITER ISLAND, 28 MARCH

Tiger Woods was released on bail late Friday, hours after being arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence following a crash near his home on Jupiter Island, Florida.

According to Martin County Sheriff John Budensiek, Woods was travelling at "high speeds" on a residential road when his Land Rover attempted to overtake a truck, clipped its trailer and rolled onto its side. The 50-year-old, who was not injured, showed "signs of impairment" and appeared lethargic, officials said.

Woods agreed to a breathalyser test, which detected no alcohol, but refused a urine test. Under Florida law, he was required to remain in custody for at least eight hours before posting bail.

Authorities believe medication or drugs may have been involved, though definitive results are unlikely.

Tiger Woods was reportedly travelling at high speed when his car attempted to overtake a truck, clipped its trailer and rolled onto its side —*PTI*

Budensiek described Woods as cooperative but said he declined to incriminate himself.

It marks Woods' second DUI-related arrest not involving alcohol, following a 2017 incident when he admitted to taking a mix of painkillers and later pleaded guilty to reckless driving.

US President Donald Trump, a friend of Woods, expressed sympathy, calling him "an amazing man" facing difficulties. —*PTI*

LeBron, Bronny make NBA history with first dad-son assist

LOS ANGELES, 28 MARCH

LeBron James made NBA history by combining with son Bronny James for the league's first father-son assist during the Los Angeles Lakers' 116-99 win over the Brooklyn Nets.

The landmark moment came in the second quarter when LeBron, the NBA's all-time leading scorer, passed out of a double team to Bronny, who calmly knocked down a three-pointer.

The pair shared nearly four-and-a-half minutes on court together, marking their second straight game logging meaningful minutes side by side.

Both players scored during their stint, with LeBron driving in for a lay-up before setting up his son.

Bronny, who has largely played limited minutes this season, has recently seen increased involvement due to injuries in the Lakers' backcourt.

The duo are the first father-son combination to play together in the NBA. Bronny described the experience as "a dream come true" as he continues to learn alongside one of the game's greats. —*PTI*